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*Viața intelectuală și artistică în primul deceniu al regimului Ceaușescu 1965–1974* (Intellectual and artistic life in the first decade of the Ceaușescu regime, 1965–1974) is the third volume in a series authored by Cristian Vasile on Romanian culture under communism. It focuses on the decade in which cultural policies of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) went from “the apparent abandonment of socialist realism” to the beginnings of a discernible cult of personality and a re-ideologization of culture (p. 17). It was in 1974 that Nicolae Ceaușescu was proclaimed president of the Romanian Socialist Republic while still leading the RCP.

From 1965 on, Ceaușescu continued the course of relative independence from Soviet domination begun by his predecessor Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. In the mid-1960s, Romanian writers and artists exhaled during a kind of thaw. The year 1968 became the high watermark of Ceaușescu’s domestic popularity, as he declined to join the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague Spring experiment in liberal communism. Yet two years earlier, Ceaușescu had abruptly decreed abortions (Romanians’ main means of birth control) to be illegal; and just three years later, Ceaușescu’s official visits to China and North Korea preceded his July Theses speech in 1971, which reemphasized the importance of communist ideology for culture and education. These zigs and zags suggest that 1965-74 is a key decade to research. Vasile is not the first to study it, and he engages with some of his precursors, even if his stance vis-à-vis other scholars’ findings is often less than clear.

The book consists of five chapters that read almost like separate archival excursions bound together by the coincidence of time and place, without much attempt at connecting dots. The first chapter is about history museums and monuments going back to 1946. Some of these projects remained unfulfilled or were delayed by political, administrative, financial, and logistical issues. Given limited space, a Museum of National History took a back seat to the Lenin-Stalin Museum in 1957, for example. I would have liked to know more about the latter. The other museum, however, did materialize finally, but its very name became an object of debate: the National History Museum, the Fatherland History Museum, and the National History Museum of the Romanian Socialist Republic were all on the table, only to have Ceaușescu ultimately impose the History Museum of the Romanian Socialist Republic—without “National.” Vasile interprets this choice of name as signaling that the mounting nationalism of the Ceaușescu regime was nevertheless unlike interwar nationalism. Other symbolic gestures were
similarly in need of deciphering. A monument to the 1933 Grivița railroad strikers failed to be erected in Bucharest, not only because an overall urban plan had not been finalized, Vasile suggests, but also because Ceauşescu wished to downplay the importance of his predecessor, Gheorghiu-Dej, who had been one of the heroes of the Griviţa strike. The discussions and disagreements among specialists about the History Museum’s contents and structure is an interesting feature of this chapter, as is the competition for archaeological artifacts among history museums around the country.

In the next chapter, Vasile takes up amateur theater, song, and dance mainly practiced by communist youth and labor groups but also by people in rural areas. The sources here are often those of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the wooden tongue of those documents leaches at times into the author’s own prose. Amateur groups were under strict control by the authorities who could better enforce ideological correctness here than among creative professionals. In a sense, these amateurs were the agitational propaganda forces of the regime—except when they were not. Vasile notes the deployment of professionalized amateur dance groups to the Black Sea towns during the summer season where they entertained predominantly foreign tourists, including by performing striptease acts. The interest in foreign currency trumped socialist morality. At other times, authorities straddled the thin line between embracing folklore and its identification with ethnic nationalism, on the one hand, and shrinking in horror at the spontaneous performance of traditional Christmas carols by hundreds of students in the streets of Bucharest in December 1968, on the other. Vasile also argues that the Ceauşescu regime attempted to control folk culture in the countryside so as to discourage spontaneous cultural gatherings or religious pilgrimages, particularly after many political prisoners were freed in 1964. He finally points out that the regime began already in its first decade to use the amateur artistic movement and folklorism to mobilize groups that could be used, potentially, against professional cultural elites, thus canceling out any notions of liberalization.

The third chapter turns to theater. While socialist realism was abandoned in the 1960s, with the exception of Eugen Ionescu, playwrights whose works had been excluded during the Stalinist period were not returned to theater repertoires and were even deleted from theater histories. Ana Novac is an example of such forgotten playwrights, one that Vasile resurrects. He then describes how the sausage was made: through what kind of process seasonal repertoires were set, what political indoctrination looked like for theater people, and how the ratio of domestic and foreign plays was decided. The chapter also provides a few close-ups. The career of playwright Aurel Baranga, whose opportunism gained him a seat on the Central Committee, contrasts with the exile of the film and theater director Lucian Pintilie. The impact of the July Theses on theater, among other cultural fields, is another thread of the chapter. The Theses called for intensifying cultural and ideological work, for setting up a thematic editorial and artistic plan that screenwriters and playwrights were expected to meet. The July Theses engendered new forms of censorship. Directors sometimes preferred presumably less controversial classical plays. But these too were staged and seen by audiences as veiled depictions of contemporary politics, and they could be censored. Such was the case of the Romanian production of Nikolai Gogol’s Inspector General, which opened at the Bulandra Theater in Bucharest in September 1972 under Pintilie’s direction. The play was forced to close after just three performances (just as a contemporary Moscow production did). A year later, the director left Romania and continued his career in the West.

Chapter 4 deals ostensibly with the field of literature, although history, film, and philosophy are somehow included. We find out that one reason
for abandoning socialist realism was economic in nature: large stocks of unpopular fiction sat unsold in warehouses. Both novels and historical works on previously taboo subjects like Romanian-Hungarian relations now got the green light. Under the preface of a high-placed communist ideologue, the previously banned national-spiritualist philosophy of Lucian Blaga could now be reprinted, and exiled writers with fascist pasts could begin to be mentioned by the president of the Writers’ Union, thus signaling to others what taboos were being lifted. Still, the authorities balked at the abundant and strange fruit of liberalization, and they attempted “an agitprop mobilization against cultural, literary, and student reviews at the end of the 1960s” (p. 145).

Chapter 5, which concerns the structure and reform of the educational system, is rather awkwardly shoehorned into a book titled *Viața intelectuală și artistică* (Intellectual and artistic life). But some themes that Vasile addresses here, such as the renunciation of Soviet tutelage and of compulsory Russian-language instruction, in order to resume partially a prewar national canon, while at the same time shifting after 1971 to more trenchant neo-Stalinist rhetoric and legislation, do speak to the rest of the book.

This volume is full of hidden treasures but these are not always easy to decipher. Archival finds are noted rather than fully explored, much less knitted into a clear overall narrative. Some truly important topics are buried in the weeds and the book’s structure seems almost arbitrary. A major topic such as the 1964 release, and uneven integration of, intellectual political prisoners and their impact on cultural institutions, social mobilization, and politics comes up—but only tangentially—in two chapters. It deserves to be treated frontally and in detail, perhaps in its very own chapter.
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